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# The Little School That Could

By Nick O'Han  
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Each spring in New York's Greenwich Village, The Little Red School House & Elisabeth Irwin High School (LREI) observes Founders Day. The highlight of the occasion is always the faculty skit, in which teachers reenact the story of the school's birth in 1932 for an audience of students ranging in age from four to 18. The teachers ham it up, and the students never get enough of it — not least because each year the performance ends with the appearance of an ice cream vendor, part of the real story, who shows up right on time with ice cream cones for everyone. It's great fun, but it's also a good history lesson. During the spring and summer of 1932, America was mired in the Great Depression, and the story of Little Red is a parable for the times. Each year, students appreciate a little more of the story — starting with the fact that Little Red School House (there was no high school yet) was not exactly born that year; it was *reborn*. Therein lies a tale, of course, and maybe a parable for our own time as well.

At the center of the drama is a charismatic, imperturbable woman of perpetual energy and focus, who seems to be everywhere at once, calmly directing the activities of scores of children and adults. She is Elisabeth Irwin, LREI's founder, described by a contemporary in the summer of 1932 as "directing her enthusiastic paint-daubed crew while bringing supplies of orange crates and old lumber from neighborhood stores in her Ford station wagon — which usually also held her two dogs along with the loot." But that comes later. The drama starts in the spring. Irwin was already a widely recognized Greenwich Village figure, and the Little Red School House was well known in educational circles. Since 1921, she had conducted an "experiment" in modern — or progressive — education in a number of New York City public schools. But the Great Depression, as the Founders Day skit recounts, changed all that.

Elisabeth Irwin is a fascinating figure in the history of both urban and progressive education — and in the history of the independent school movement as well. Born in 1880 in Brooklyn, she was educated at Packer Collegiate Institute and Smith College, where she studied philosophy, economics, and foreign languages. Later, she would add graduate degrees in social work and psychology. She was a born iconoclast, described as "believing in the need for reform of almost every phase of American life — politics, economics, the status of women, the family" and, most importantly, education. After graduation, along with hundreds of idealistic college-educated women at the turn of the 20th century, she sought "vital contact," to borrow journalist John Reed's phrase, with conditions in the nation's large cities. So in 1903, she moved to the Lower East Side of Manhattan to join the settlement movement.<sup>1</sup> There she encountered the appalling conditions in many of New York City's overcrowded public schools and discovered her life's work.

Sometime in 1909 or 1910, she joined the Public Education Association (PEA), first as a volunteer, then as a staff member, serving as a visiting teacher (visiting teachers were the first school social workers) and a consulting psychologist. Founded in 1895, the PEA emerged out of the "good government movement" of the late 19th century. This civic crusade, with its high moralism and decidedly nativist and antidemocratic undertones, reflected the elitist disdain and fear that the "better sort of people" felt toward the corrupt politicians of Tammany Hall and the people who supported it. But by 1900 the progressive movement was evolving and gathering steam. The Public Education Association would be in the thick of these changes.

The PEA had started as a ladies auxiliary, with school improvement as the focus of its charitable work. Then, in 1905, with the financial backing of forward-thinking elements in business and philanthropy, the organization reinvented itself as a separate entity. It assembled a brilliant staff from the newly professionalized world of social work and from the settlement movement. It drew on new ideas coming from the academia and the world of science about childhood and the power of environment and education to determine behavior and values formerly believed to be unalterably determined. The theories of Sigmund Freud, introduced around the same time in America, reinforced the fundamental importance John Dewey placed on the early years of life. Progressive reformers of all stripes turned to the school as potentially the most potent agency of social change.

Irwin studied Freud and Dewey, with whom she worked on various projects during this period. She would later write that the prevailing concept of childhood when she entered the field regarded it as a kind of "door-sill to life... a period of inactive waiting, [a] purgatory of preparation... that the individual passes through and recovers from." Replacing that premise at the center of education became her abiding passion and the PEA led the way. Its first major victory was the substantial one achieved after years of lobbying the legislature to make education compulsory in New York State.<sup>2</sup>

That accomplishment brought in its wake many challenges. Schools were woefully overcrowded and 70 percent of the children showing up on registration day were immigrants or the children of at least one immigrant parent. Therefore, the first question the PEA faced was simply where to put all the new students compulsory education would bring. The organization successfully lobbied for new, modern school buildings and hundreds were built in the following decade. The second question was even more daunting - how can the curriculum and learning environment be reorganized in order to properly and efficiently educate all these new Americans, and everyone else for that matter, for a rapidly changing world? The association funded and staffed experimental projects in the public schools, and it lobbied for an agenda of education reforms that reads like the table of contents for a book on modern education. Virtually all the standard features of modern public education were represented including kindergarten, laboratory science and nature studies, as well arts education, sex education and special education. It created the first "visiting teachers" program in the nation, and advocated for the inclusion of families in the process of educating their children. It proposed that urban schools become neighborhood centers collaborating with cooperating institutions to educate the community's children. And it funded pilot programs testing the efficacy of new instructional methods, new ways of arranging the physical layout of the classroom and new ways of organizing the school day.

The PEA challenged many sacred cows, and perhaps the most sacred of all were the very definitions of knowledge and learning upon which the whole edifice of public schooling rested. How do children think and learn? How do they evolve and grow? How do teachers teach different kinds of learners? During the decade preceding the First World War, the organization proposed new models of school culture, professional life, curriculum theory, and classroom management. Not surprisingly, it encountered resistance wherever it turned. New ideas about child development and teaching practice might be held by vanguard thinkers such as John Dewey, found in the theories of childhood and learning promoted by such groups as The Child Study Society and The Froebel Society, or translated into practice in the City's experimental nurseries, kindergartens, and elementary school. But as Elisabeth Irwin would soon find out from personal experience, such new programs and approaches were viewed by most big city public school educators and administrators as visionary and impractical. They were also viewed as threatening to the politicians of Tammany Hall who ran the city and appointed the teachers and staff, not to mention the holders of Tammany patronage themselves. Both shared a comfort level with things the way they were and a vested interest in keeping them that way. Aside from a few cracks of light, the *status quo* in New York City, held strong.<sup>3</sup>

In 1910, the Public Education Association became interested in the newly available Binet Intelligence Scales. Within the decade, the Army would adapt these scales to test and classify millions of American youth entering the Selective Service. Based on this gigantic demonstration project, universities produced scores of new mental measures and schools began applying them all over the country. This was all in the future, however. In 1910, a handful of individuals — Elisabeth Irwin prominent among them — was exploring the possibilities of applying the tests to deal with the challenges confronting American educators.

Two of the most urgent of these challenges were "retardation" and truancy. Retardation was the practice that we would call retention, i.e., the policy of leaving behind "failing" students while the rest of the class moved on to the next age-based grade. Studies revealed that the number of such children in a given New York City classroom could reach as high as 30 or 40 percent. Its inevitable result was massive truancy throughout the system. Irwin made her mark in these areas, researching retardation and truancy in neighborhoods and classrooms throughout the city. In 1914 she was joined in this work by the former dean of students at the University of California Berkeley, Lucy Sprague Mitchell, who had come east two years before. Mitchell joined the PEA and sought out Irwin to learn about the new "science" of intelligence. In 1916, Irwin would return the favor, helping Mitchell found the Bureau of Educational Experiments, later the Bank Street College of Education.<sup>4</sup>

When it came to the new IQ tests, the views of experimental educators like Mitchell and Irwin would evolve over the years. Irwin would always remain skeptical about just what human intelligence was, and she was convinced that no one test or assessment mechanism could get to the bottom of the human mind or character, personality or capacity for human happiness. But educators in the large cities faced practical problems as real and complex as the world for which they were attempting to prepare their graduates. They were searching for answers. The new science of intelligence provided them, with the rigor, clarity, and uniformity of the laws of gravity. Mental measurement revolutionized both educational practice and school management.

For Irwin, the most desired result such testing promised was heading off the psychological damage and maladjustment caused by retardation. The situation had reached crisis proportions. There they sat, thousands of students often two and three years older than their age-appropriate classmates, often off in a corner — "the old dunce cap atrocity," she called it — to be pitied, or worse ridiculed by the majority of the class. In many neighborhoods the inevitable result was that the streets and workshops were filled with children who never went to school at all. She was appalled. As "babies die in institutions for lack of personal love," she wrote, so "children suffer in school for lack of inspiration." She regarded retardation as the master symbol for the dysfunctions of a public school system that failed to meet the needs of individual children.

Educators such as William Maxwell, the city's superintendent of schools, and forward-looking district supervisors like Julia Richman promoted grouping, or classification, of students. They believed that all children were not equipped to learn the same content as every one else, at the same pace, in classes of fifty or more students. Like Elisabeth Irwin they observed the damage to children's self-esteem and the truancy rates that were the policy's inevitable results. But the criteria, and the motivation, for failing children varied from

school to school, indeed from teacher to teacher. Most often failure was chalked up to lack of effort, moral laxity, or the typical behavior among a particular social class or racial group. Many teachers took it as a badge of honor to fail a high percentage of their students. They certainly had no training in adapting new approaches and materials to accommodate students with special needs. It was hoped that an answer to the problem was the Board of Education's new Department of Ungraded Classes, established in 1906 and directed by the legendary Elizabeth Farrell. Here they would be spared from the humiliation, abuse, and disillusionment that the policy of retardation and official designation as failures brought with it. Ordinary school administrators and teachers, however, possessed no particular training in assessing the causes of school performance and therefore in assigning students to an ungraded class. The resulting laissez faire approach to classifying students was strewn with biases and confusion. No wonder, that comparing education to medieval medicine, Elisabeth Irwin commented that the former "was still in its bloodletting phase."<sup>5</sup>

Intelligence testing provided a scientific way to proceed. The PEA assigned Irwin to be Farrell's assistant. She quickly became indispensable, Farrell telling a New York Times reporter how Irwin "went to the homes of many children and, through her presence and counsel, brought about between parents and school authorities a better mutual understanding with regard to the needs and natures of individual pupils." Assigned by Farrell to test children having great difficulty for possible assignment to the Ungraded Classes, she saw the usefulness of psychometric testing used in conjunction with other new methods of evaluation.<sup>6</sup> Many students left behind year after year were highly intelligent. Perhaps they were bored; perhaps there were other reasons for their performance having to do with their maturity, psychological adjustment or home life. Irwin called for an end to the "one curriculum fits all fallacy" and for the development of methods and materials suited to student's needs and capacities. She advocated testing to discover what those needs and capacities were. The wise use of intelligence testing, she wrote, could head off untold psychological damage and the truancy and perhaps antisocial behavior it produced. Along with other methods of assessing students, it could identify children's capacities of early enough to conserve, cultivate, and promote their potential and possibilities in life. To create such a model of schooling, a model that recognized each individual's unique qualities and developmental needs became her highest goal. She would soon have a chance to pursue her vision on a grand scale.<sup>7</sup>

Irwin's star rose rapidly. In 1916, the PEA appointed her to direct a pilot project in P.S. 64, a large school of 3,000 boys located in a densely populated, immigrant neighborhood on the Lower East Side near Tompkins Square Park. Irwin was familiar with the school having consulted there since 1912. Now, working with Louis Marks, the school's principal, she made P.S. 64 into New York City's first laboratory public school. Her goal was to demonstrate that it was possible to implement new theories of intelligence, developmental psychology, mental hygiene, and progressive pedagogy in large, inner city public schools in ways that were humane, efficient, and productive. To do this she administered intelligence tests to every student in the school. Next she established what today we would label a holistic, diagnostic-prescriptive approach to the education of the whole child. Teachers were guided by a child study team made up of a visiting teacher, a school psychologist (Irwin herself), and a school psychiatrist. Using the casework method borrowed from social work, the team viewed each child intensively through different lenses — intelligence testing, empirical observation, health data, family background, home life, and each child's emotional life and developmental profile. Her objective, expressed in the title of her 1924 book, *Fitting the School to the Child*, was to identify each child's "capacities and problems at the very beginning of their school life, rather than after they had drifted along for several years."

Irwin was clearly ahead of her time.<sup>8</sup> She detested the regimentation, authoritarianism, and coerciveness of the traditional school, where children "are fitted into a slit between a bench and a desk in a room with fifty others," ready to be trained to "stand up and sit down on command, and shout in chorus certain responses to certain symbols on the blackboard." Such an approach to education, she believed, made school "a sort of strait-jacket for the impulses and the instincts in which they atrophy for a stated number of hours a day."<sup>9</sup> How could they learn in such a bleak environment, in a building resembling an army barracks, and in classrooms set up like factories and assembly lines? Physical, intellectual, and emotional growth was arrested, she believed, even in the newer buildings, such as P.S. 64 itself, designed by Charles Snyder, where the impact of improved light and ventilation was soon overwhelmed by what went on within them. "The child is no factory product," Irwin protested. So she set out to change the learning environment, to humanize classrooms, and in doing so helped transform the physical environment and materials culture of the American school. Classrooms became active, lively, and colorful places at P.S. 64, laboratories, not monasteries, as Irwin put it, "laboratories where children could experiment with life."<sup>10</sup>

In 1921, P.S. 64 was converted into a junior high school and the PEA moved Irwin's experimental classes to the annex of nearby P.S. 61, a red brick building owned by The Children's Aid Society. The symbolism was irresistible and the Little Red School House was born. For the next 11 years she continued to develop her ideas, believing that "those people are happiest and healthiest who can best adjust to reality [and] meet life face to face." She de-emphasized "immediate, showy results," and stressed organic growth, the importance of play, and the cultivation of imagination. She pioneered a new set of pedagogical norms, cultivating in students "the unself-conscious industry that springs from interest in work, rather than 'the desire to get ahead of someone else.'" At the Little Red School House there were no gold stars posted on the bulletin board for the best work. There were no report cards either, no textbooks, no drill or recitation, and none of the routine humiliation and corporal punishment meted out to children in public schools of the era. Irwin's work represented an alternative to the conventional wisdom of generations of educators.

"Threats of all kinds were taboo" at Little Red. Children were treated humanely, respectfully, and firmly. Above all, they were treated not as little adults, but as children, each one a unique moral, mental, and creative agent, and each one expected to be a contributing

member of the classroom community.<sup>11</sup> The curriculum was revolutionary as well. Learning was not confined to the classroom. Once a week, pupils went on field trips. They studied life by immersing themselves in the city's sights and sounds and smells, its people and places and buildings, not by memorizing and reciting passages from a textbook. Classroom activities were planned around the opportunities field trips presented for children to reflect on their experiences, and to express, symbolize, interpret, and recast their ideas through various media — storytelling, writing and painting, block building and mapping, singing, dancing, and performing. Such "experiential learning" culminated each June when the school closed at the end of May and the entire faculty and student body went off together for a month in the country. This was June Camp and it became a cherished tradition that lasted until the early 1960s.<sup>12</sup>

The Little Red School House became a sensation in New York. The *New York Times* wrote that it represented an alternative to "time-honored educational methods," substituting "the ideal of cooperation for that of competition... [and] the concept of learning from experience for traditional methods of instruction."<sup>13</sup> News about the school appeared frequently in the daily press, where readers would find pictures of Irwin's students exploring the city's streets and neighborhoods and shipyards, walking through its waterfront and markets, against the backdrop of its skyscrapers and public institutions. Virtually the only kids in town not locked away in their classrooms, they dressed in overalls, identical for boys and girls — unconventional to say the least, but highly appropriate for mucking about. One paper, in fact, referred to Little Red School House as the "overalls school," and it caught on. In the meantime, Irwin's reputation as a theorist-practitioner grew through articles published in such journals as *Progressive Education*, *The Nation*, *The Survey*, and *The New Republic*.

She never won over the power brokers in New York's City Hall, however, or in Tammany Hall, which was no friend of educational or any other kind of reform. Mayor John Hylan, who famously believed that, "we have had all the reform that we want in this city for some time to come," proved a relentless and patient adversary of Irwin's experimental approaches. Hylan replaced reformer William Ettinger as superintendent of schools with William O'Shea, who tried to close Irwin's experimental program down by condemning the building. But Irwin had allies in high places, too, including William Grady, associate superintendent of schools and Irwin's first principal at P.S. 64 and other reformers in the state and city education hierarchy such as Ruth Andrus, New York State's director of elementary education. Prominent educational theorist such as John Dewey and William Heard Kilpatrick strongly supported Irwin's work, as did equally prominent New Yorkers in philanthropy and government such as Margaret Lewisohn and Eleanor Roosevelt, the First Lady of the state and future First Lady of the country. So Irwin's adversaries bided their time.

In January of 1930, at Superintendent O'Shea's insistence, an evaluating committee led by Paul L. Klapper, dean of the School of Education at City College, researched performances of former Little Red students in the city's junior high schools. In general, it found them to be superior. But the next year, results of a second evaluation proved less positive. This time the test evaluated Irwin's third-grade students, not those who had finished the program through 6th grade. They were compared to a control group in the same building. The committee found that "the children in the experimental group, brought up on a program...which subordinates formal drill, did better on the achievement tests than the children in the control group." But in three disciplines — arithmetic, vocabulary, and language — their formal skills fell below students in the control group, who had been brought up on traditional methods. Irwin argued that for the tests to be fair they should not have been administered until after completion of the sixth grade. She also reminded the committee that the tests did not measure skills like group work, and what we would call "habits of mind" such as creativity, personal initiative, and decision-making - areas in which Little Red School House students excelled. But her arguments were to no avail. Superintendent O'Shea had his opening.<sup>14</sup>

In the spring of 1932, the Great Depression was hitting every institution in American life deep and hard. Banks and businesses were failing, and the schools were no different. Many private schools closed and public schools were forced to cut spending drastically. So-called extras were on the chopping block. The Public Education Association had to focus its dwindling resources on feeding the thousands of children who arrived at school hungry every morning. Early in 1932, PEA Executive Director Howard Nudd informed Superintendent O'Shea that his organization would no longer be able to provide funding for Irwin's experimental classes. O'Shea immediately announced that, because of the budgetary crisis, Little Red would be eliminated, with students in the experimental classes to be absorbed into the regular classes in the fall. This news left the students in Irwin's classes stunned and distraught, and their parents very angry. *The New York Evening Post* expressed the common sentiment. "Lack of Funds Dooms Progressive Education," ran the headline, and things indeed looked grim.<sup>15</sup>

The parents never wavered, however. They organized a series of fund-raising meetings and set up informal headquarters in a Greenwich Village ice cream parlor. Within weeks, they raised enough money in pledges to pay the salaries for Irwin and her staff. But when they approached O'Shea, he responded that it was "against public policy to engage in experimental work conducted at the expense of the parents of the children." What he said next turned the celebration the parents had scheduled for that evening into a protest and created a media firestorm: "The appraisal of the work so far would not justify the Board in rescinding its decision to discontinue the experiment at the end of June, 1932."

The parents again rallied. So did a host of influential New Yorkers. John Dewey called the board's action "reactionary," and a group of reformers led by Eleanor Roosevelt, members of the philanthropic community, and progressive educators from around the country sprang into action. The Progressive Education Association convened a special meeting in New York City to respond to the Board of

Education's action. Three hundred teachers and parents from around the country cited Elisabeth Irwin's services "to education throughout the nation." Calling the board's action "a breach of faith," they sent a petition demanding that the decision be reversed. Scores of articles in the city's major daily newspapers editorialized much the same thing.<sup>16</sup>

The battle over the Little Red School House in the spring of 1932 represents an important, though overlooked, episode in what historian Diane Ravitch has called the city's "Great School Wars."<sup>17</sup> The Board of Education refused to budge, despite the public outcry. So the parents, guided by Irwin, proceeded to work outside the system. By June, they released a statement to the press that contained a fully developed plan to convert the Little Red School House into a private institution. "Many cities throughout the country are ready and eager to accept the ideals and practices of the newer education," they wrote. "Therefore, it is planned to set up a typically American school, which will assist those who wish to try similar educational experiments." The statement made clear that, although Little Red was leaving the public school system, it had no intention of becoming an elite private school. As its state charter would soon make explicit, they envisioned "a small, experimental school that duplicated a typical public school situation." Tuition would be kept low so that students of all races, religions, and socioeconomic classes would attend. Classes would be the same size as those in public schools to reduce expenses, and thus the school would demonstrate that it could provide superior education without spending any more money on each student than the public schools did.

The mission of the Little Red School House would remain unchanged. It would be a demonstration center for educational reform, and, working with New York University, The City University of New York, and the Cooperative School for Student Teachers, a training site for public school teachers. During the next few months, Irwin seemed to be everywhere at once. She found a new home for the school, a beautiful Italianate building at 196 Bleecker Street that the First Presbyterian Church provided free of charge. She obtained a state charter, recruited additional staff members and families, and directed scores of parents, teachers, and children over the summer to outfit the new facility. In September 1932, New York's newest independent school opened with 150 students in grades one through six.<sup>18</sup>

It is not without irony, that in the years that followed, Irwin found she was able to influence public school reform more successfully than while Little Red had been an experimental pilot program within the public school system. The Great Depression had threatened the school's very existence, but it had also precipitated a sea change in American politics. For Elisabeth Irwin and the Little Red School House, the stars were suddenly realigned. Franklin Roosevelt's election in November assured that Little Red would have a special friend in the White House. Eleanor Roosevelt would serve on the school's board of advisors for decades and she often participated in its programs starting in 1934. That fall, she and Irwin organized the first International Exhibition of Children's Art held at the new Rockefeller Center, featuring artwork by students from Little Red and other New York City schools, as well as from 60 foreign countries.

By this time, Fiorello LaGuardia's reform administration had replaced Tammany Hall, and a new superintendent of schools, William Campbell, replaced Irwin's antagonist William O'Shea. Thus, in an astonishing turnaround, just two years after being virtually evicted from the public school system, the Little Red School House was being held up as a model for public schools to emulate. Superintendent Campbell issued a report that essentially endorsed the critique of city schools that the Public Education Association and Elisabeth Irwin had been offering for nearly two decades. "With one of the most heterogeneous school systems in the world," he wrote, "New York schools have scarcely touched the problems of adapting curricular programs to the individual needs of children." At a citywide conference, which Campbell convened soon after, keynote speaker Howard Nudd told the audience that the Superintendent's Report was "in keeping with modern thought in education" and "in line with what Elisabeth Irwin had worked to achieve at the Little Red School House."

In September 1935, Irwin launched an "activity program" based on her core ideas about experiential education and using the city as a classroom. The program was endorsed by the Teacher's Union and adopted by the Board of Education. Little Red faculty members conducted training classes, and the program was ultimately introduced in over 70 schools attended by 75,000 children taught by 2,200 teachers. Two years later, the entire issue of the annual Superintendent's Report was devoted to the results. It discussed the educational potency of the field trip and related activities in the classroom as practiced at Little Red now being taught to teachers all over New York. "One trip" out into the city, the report stated, "is worth the power of a dozen lessons from a textbook."

For Irwin, the power of field trips was most clearly reflected in the questions children raised as a result of their experiences in the real world, in the intellectual and aesthetic problems such experiences provoked, and the symbolic and logical activities of mind and spirit they generated. She wrote that the curiosity that has long driven grownups to despair was finally being taken seriously by modern educators. "When children scream with pain," she wrote, "they receive immediate attention, but they have screamed with curiosity for generations... [it is] their way to find out about the world." Such curiosity was the key to progressive education. "That is all this new method of education is, a response to children's questions," she wrote, "a legitimate mendicant for what has long been considered abnormal curiosity."<sup>19</sup>

John Dewey, Irwin once wrote, had given Little Red its philosophy of "learning by doing," and the activity program illustrates perfectly how Irwin turned that philosophical principle into carefully executed educational practice through thoughtful planning and

continuous teacher preparation.<sup>20</sup> Like Dewey, Irwin was at one and the same time a child-centered and society-centered educator who believed that mental hygiene was cultivated through group socialization and participation in a democratic school culture. But she was also a pedagogical progressive - the term is Davis Tyack's - who fostered personal development and democratic values such as social conscience and empathy for people of different races, classes, genders and cultural backgrounds through rigorously planned curriculum and teaching practice. Dewey had been admonishing many progressive schools for the lack of such carefully planned curriculum and teaching practices since at least 1929. Beginning that year with his inaugural address to the Progressive Education Association, Dewey continually called on progressive educators to develop "coherent" and experimentally derived principles that could serve as a "distinctive contribution to the theory of education."<sup>21</sup> It was Irwin's success in achieving this Deweyan synthesis that makes her one of the most important influences in 20th century American education. Along with a circle of experimental educators in New York City, she continued to integrate all three elements of Dewey's thought in the 1920s and '30s.

Despite its growing reputation and influence, however, the Depression years remained a very precarious time for Little Red, indeed for all independent schools, but especially small, experimental ones. Irwin had gone without a salary during the school's first three years and she worked ceaselessly throughout the decade to make sure it survived. In 1934, she organized the Associated Experimental Schools (AES), a coalition of like-minded educators. Participants included Caroline Pratt, founder of the City and Country School, Lucy Sprague Mitchell, founder of the Cooperative School for Student Teachers (later Bank Street College of Education), and Harriet Johnson, of The Nursery School associated with Bank Street College. Others included Margaret Naumburg, of the Walden School and the directors of two upstate schools, Elizabeth Goldsmith of the Manumit School in Pawling, New York, and Elisabeth Moos of the Hessian Hills School in Croton. AES was a kind of educational cooperative — part economic and part pedagogical — led by pioneers in the progressive education movement. They shared resources, ideas, and experiences. They developed strategies to pool functions and operate more efficiently. They worked together to keep their values and principles at the center of educational discourse.<sup>22</sup>

But most important of all in ensuring Little Red's survival amidst hard times was the amount of time Irwin spent talking and writing to its families and its growing body of supporters about the school's values and mission. Inextricably linked in her thinking to the education of the "whole child" was the education and cultivation of what we might call the "whole community." The Little Red extended family was an inclusive, knowledgeable, and empowered school community of committed stakeholders. They remained as fiercely committed as they had been in 1932 and worked to ensure the school's survival. "The parents saved the school then," Irwin remarked many times for the rest of her life, and they kept on saving it." In fact, they bet on its future. Starting in 1938, they pushed Irwin to open a high school division, and in the fall of 1941, the Little Red High School opened its doors. The following year it would be renamed Elisabeth Irwin High School in honor of its founder, who died in October 1942.<sup>23</sup>

Elisabeth Irwin's inspired leadership and her ability to articulate a vision of education that embraced mental hygiene, democratic values, rigorous curriculum, disciplined teaching methods, developmentally astute guidance and discipline, and inclusive governance was a remarkable accomplishment. To this vision, she brought equally remarkable political skills, skills that enabled her to rally New Yorkers ranging from top government officials, to opinion makers, educational thinkers and, most importantly, to parents and children. Finally, all these talents were combined in a person who was fearless and possessed qualities of purpose, will, commitment and courage that were inspiring. The network of support that she created and sustained over the years simply refused to let the Little Red School House disappear.

Words John Dewey wrote in 1941 offer a postscript to the story of the school's near-death and rebirth: "The Little Red School House provides a model for large-scale educational reform of the nation's public schools. [Little Red's] lively and vital story is evidence that the new movement is indeed coming of age." Nothing, he concluded, should stand "in the way of the adoption of [its] purposes and methods by schools and classes operating under the conditions which affect public school work."<sup>24</sup> As independent schools grapple with a dismal economic environment that many liken to the events of the 1930s, perhaps the story of The Little Red School House & Elisabeth Irwin High School can also inspire and sustain us today.

## Notes

1. The first settlement houses were established in London. The movement was introduced in this country in 1886, first in New York and Chicago before spreading to other large cities. The Lower East Side of New York had the greatest concentration of settlements in the country. The College Settlement, where Irwin was a resident, was founded in 1889. Perhaps the most famous settlement in New York, surpassed in influence only by Chicago's Hull House, was Lillian Wald's Henry Street Settlement, founded in 1893. Settlement workers socialized with local residents, the majority of whom were poor immigrant families. They offered classes in English, arts and crafts, and nutrition, counseling sessions that provided assistance in assimilating and finding work, and opportunities to celebrate native culture to uprooted foreigners who missed home. Finally, they volunteered at a wide range of municipal social services, which were woefully understaffed. These included the Public Health Service and the public schools, especially the new kindergartens, which were often held in the settlement houses themselves.

2. Sol Cohen, *Progressives and Urban School Reform*, (New York: Teachers College Press, 1964), p. 1-29, 75-78 and *passim*; Elisabeth Irwin, "Personal Education," *The New Republic*, Nov. 12, 1924, p. 38.
3. Cohen, pp. 53-55; 67-70.
4. See Leonard Ayers, *Laggards in Our Schools* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1909); Elisabeth Irwin and Louis Marks, *Fitting the School to the Child*, (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1924), pp. 28-72; Elisabeth Irwin, *Truancy*, (New York: Public Education Association, 1913), pp. 1-8, and *passim*; G. D. Strayer, *Age and Grade Census of Schools and Colleges*, (New York: Board of Education, 1911).
5. Kimberly Kode, *Elizabeth Farrell and the History of Special Education*, (Arlington, Virginia: The Council for Exceptional Children, 2002), *passim*; *Fitting the School to the Child*, pp. 132-160, 314.
6. Executive Committee Minutes, The Public Education Society, December 14, 1912; *The Public and the Schools*, 3-1-13; The New York Times, January 27, 1913.
7. Irwin and Marks, *Fitting the School to the Child*, pp. 112-131.
8. *op. cit.*, pp. 59-73, 307-326.
9. Irwin, "Personal Education," p. 47, 49.
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17. Diane Ravitch, *The Great School Wars*, (New York: Basic Books, 1974).
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## AUTHOR

### Nicholas O'Han

Nicholas O'Han is the school historian at The Little Red School House & Elisabeth Irwin High School (New York).